Project Information Literacy
Provocation Series

The iSchool Equation

Librarians are increasingly being looked to as one solution to the spread of misinformation, but are iSchools producing graduates who possess the teaching skills to tackle this growing problem?

CAREER

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Tweet

What is the value of a graduate degree? That's not an existential question like "what's the value of learning?" though it could be. It's a calculation: time plus tuition minus the chance of getting the right job after graduation. When the costs far outweigh the return, a new question might occur to graduates: Can I have my money back?

True, most prospective graduate students run the math before applying to a program, but it's next to impossible to solve this equation until they have accepted that first job. And yet, it's only when new graduates enter the job market that they discover what it takes to survive in their chosen field. That's when they feel those metrics on a more visceral level.

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This is when the uncompensated labor of learning essential skills for a new position takes its heaviest toll, particularly amid an expanding student loan crisis and expectations that hold employees themselves, not their employers, responsible for continuing and paying for their professional development.

Hours of personal time spent in webinars, elbows-deep in readings, have become a tacit requirement to maintain and improve the skills learned in school. This is especially true as many new hires quickly discover the skills they learned in graduate programs have a limited shelf life.

Recent graduates from a variety of disciplines probably recognize this dynamic. But the value of iSchool degrees has a long history of being questioned by both recent graduates and academic librarians who wonder if the curriculum has kept up with the changing demands of the profession.

The narrative around academic librarians alternately portrays them as victims of the internet age or as society's saviors from it. But the reality for many academic librarians is much murkier; the demands on librarians have grown even as budget cuts demand that they do more with less, leaving many in the workforce struggling with low morale and feelings of inadequacy.

For academic librarians in instructional roles, the stakes are even higher, especially as those outside the field have taken notice. Information disorder is like a virus spreading across platforms and, with each new campaign, becoming more adept at eluding mitigation efforts. Many teaching librarians find themselves at the center of a savior narrative, called upon to create media literate students as a means of resolving this seemingly intractable crisis. At this moment, when the threat of misinformation gains increased attention, there's a new, more widespread audience for what librarians are teaching and how they teach it.

And yet, how librarians are trained to teach continues to get short shrift in graduate programs. While the graduate degree technically qualifies them for a position in an academic library, many new hires feel anything but qualified. Inconsistent introduction to important concepts have led librarians to develop and turn to the more extensive professional development that they wish they had been exposed to in iSchools. But this sink-or-swim introduction to teaching is inadequate when working with students whose critical thinking skills have been hijacked by a broken attention economy.

If iSchools aren't graduating professionals who possess the teaching skills necessary for rising to the challenges of today's information landscape, librarians are left to calculate the value of their degree and ask themselves: Am I actually prepared for my job?

The Credential Crunch

The modern conception of U.S. library schools is a relatively recent invention in the history of American librarianship.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, librarians were primarily trained through self-education and apprenticeships. The decline of this model in the United States coincided with the rise of the American Library Association (ALA) and Andrew Carnegie's extensive funding of library construction.

The professionalization of librarianship meant the adoption of a degree as the qualifying credential. These vocational changes triggered a movement that systematized formal training for librarianship, creating a filtering mechanism that ensured those who did not have the appropriate "character" could be readily identified and excluded.

Almost immediately, the field split over what should be taught, how it should be taught, and who should be taught in order to be granted the title of librarian. Programs developed specialized curriculum tracks to prepare students for various professional environments and roles, culminating in certificates, a fifth-year bachelor's degree, and, eventually, master's and doctoral programs.

By the 1950s, increased access to postsecondary education and federal funding led to an increased demand for academic libraries and the trained librarians to staff them. In response, the ALA established educational and accreditation standards that baked in the professional values of the association's leaders and made the master's the terminal degree for the field.

While accreditation standards and core competencies have evolved with the field, questions about these measures never disappeared: Do these standards and competencies accurately represent the values of the field? Do these selected values align with the skills required to do the job? And, most fundamentally of all, how do these priorities reflect what it means to be a librarian?

The definition of a librarian has expanded since the ALA began shaping the profession's training into a graduate experience. But with roughly 36 semester hours of coursework required by today's programs, the degree can't be all things to all students.

iSchools are precise in the classes they offer to ensure resources are invested in the areas that reflect the programs' values and prepare graduates for the field. Previously when these values shifted, as they did when librarians saw a greater need for training in information management and data curation, iSchools responded. And yet, instruction has always taken a backseat in library education and limited course offerings have prevented the development of a robust curriculum that meets the instructional needs of library professionals.

So if instruction isn't emphasized in iSchools, what does that say about how the qualifying credential for librarians values the librarian role as a teacher?

The Student Becomes a Teacher

In the U.S., nearly 6,000 graduates from ALA-accredited master's programs enter the field every year; an estimated 25% will land a job in an academic library. That job might not come with faculty status and it might not even have "instructor" in the title, but instruction and instructional design are now pretty standard expectations for academic library positions. In fact, one 2012 analysis showed 97% of entry-level academic library positions required some form of instruction.

There's no question of whether librarians teach (*spoiler*: we do); the real question is why has the field taken so long to embrace this responsibility in order to make improvements. Because while both expectations and the complexity of outcomes have increased, instruction is not new.

Early U.S. academic libraries focused on collection development, but that doesn't mean librarians weren't teaching. Specialized card catalogs, indices, and search tools were not intuitive, and librarians played an essential role in making the library accessible to students and faculty through bibliographic instruction.

Bibliographic instruction still has a place in modern libraries. As long as library search tools exist to be overly confusing, students will need instruction to understand where exactly to click in order to navigate. At the same time, it's also apparent students and the field have moved past these basic tutorials.

The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) 2016 adoption of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education was a clear signal that librarians were expanding their instructional roles. Instead of prescriptive, skills-based guidelines, the frames relied on a constructivist learning perspective, grounding information literacy in a more disciplinary context.

The Framework offered no easy answers to questions about instructional design, curricula, and assessments. Instead, it broadened the responsibilities placed on librarians, asking them to develop their own solutions based on the local campus culture.

This instructional role is not new; the demand and expectations have only increased. And yet, rather than preparing future librarians more rigorously, the field continued to grapple with the long-time resistance to embracing a teacher identity.

The argument over whether a teaching label is appropriate for librarians is one of semantics that will not be settled here. The fact is, librarians have been and are teaching, so the conversation over preparation for this role need not wait for a consensus. Doing so does a disservice to the practitioners entering a field in which they're expected to perform these duties.

Not only is this identity confusion passed on to students and colleagues; it also affects how this competency is viewed in graduate programs, possibly acting as one catalyst that has led librarians to feel unprepared for the career they worked so hard to enter.

In higher education, inadequate teaching preparation is not a problem unique to librarians. Most graduate programs train faculty to become disciplinary experts but not teaching experts, forcing them to look for the same on-the-job training that academic librarians use. Despite this similarity between librarians and their faculty colleagues, librarians can be particularly troubled with the gap in their professional training and their standing among faculty.

Without a disciplinary home and, therefore, no dedicated undergraduate courses in information literacy, librarians don't have the same opportunities to develop skills that teaching assistants do. Disciplinary faculty have more opportunities in their graduate programs to teach to the audiences they will see as faculty. iSchool students would be lucky to have one experience designing and delivering instruction to an authentic audience before entering the profession.

Additionally, faculty often struggle to understand librarians' teaching domain, creating a disparity between what librarians want to teach and what faculty want them to teach.

Librarians are tasked with preparing students' critical information skills despite feeling ill-equipped to do so and while speaking a different disciplinary language from instructional faculty. To cope with this reality, librarians often turn to on-the-job training to fill these gaps and teach themselves how to teach.

Librarians tend to have an "If I don't know, I'll find out" attitude that is characteristic of helping professions, and it's easy to see how this gap in professional training has resulted in an overwhelming sense of being out of place in the classroom.

In many ways it's a self-fulfilling prophecy: Librarians don't identify as teachers, graduate programs neglect their training, and librarians enter the classroom feeling unprepared, confirming they aren't prepared to be teachers in the first place. How can the field break this cycle so that librarians leave their graduate education with the training and the confidence to be effective instructors?

Seize the Moment

At this point, you would not be blamed if you're thinking, "Another argument for increasing exposure to instruction in library graduate programs? Throw it on the pile with all the rest!"

This is not the first call for a change to librarian training. As long as librarians have taught, they have urged schools to provide a more practical, responsive curriculum.

And, as part of every call for change, there was a new explanation for why graduate programs would steer a new course in response: They need to change because librarians' teaching responsibilities have expanded; because alumni identified gaps in competencies; or because the Framework called upon the field to engage more deeply with education research and theory. And yet, here we are, with limited progress and librarians — and this essay — still calling for change. So, what's different now? For the first time, the call is coming from both inside and outside the house.

Academic librarians see the need for training to address this shortcoming in their teaching preparation, but those external to the field are beginning to recognize how teaching librarians play an important role in revealing the systems underlying information ecosystems aka information literacy.

In her 2021 Project Information Literacy (PIL) Provocation Series essay, Barbara Fister illustrated how a national epistemic crisis seeped out of the classroom to create a divided reality with serious, real-world consequences. It's hard to ignore the importance of information literacy when the ramifications of misinformation literally storm the U.S. Capitol.

Lies over election fraud are just a recent example of how political discourse blurs the line between fact and fiction. PIL's 2018 study on news consumption revealed students' complicated relationship with mainstream media, as survey respondents recognized the conventional evaluation standards they had been taught had become increasingly difficult to apply. The RAND Corporation, a nonprofit interdisciplinary think tank, called for greater collaboration between journalists, librarians, public health officials, and political scientists, among other disciplines, to combat "truth decay" through media literacy.

Then came the pandemic. The cracks in the traditional media landscape were revealed as craters by Covid-19, leading the World Health Organization to declare "a massive infodemic" and prompting Joan Donovan, a well-known authority in online extremism, media manipulation, and disinformation campaigns, to call on "10,000 librarians" to solve this problem.

Information literacy is no longer librarians' pet project; professionals outside the field have taken up the banner.

To rise to this occasion, academic librarians will need more than a CRAAP checklist, a dated heuristic for evaluating found content, or a LibGuide in their instructional arsenal.

The need for additional training has always been clear, but at this moment, with the spotlight pointed squarely at librarians' roles in teaching information literacy, it is crucial for librarians to advocate for change while more people are listening.

Re-calculating the Value

The field has invested a great deal of energy to evolve in response to external changes. Libraries remained standing after the migration from physical to digital, and they survived the internet, Google, and social media.

But now, librarians are being called upon to compensate for the failures of many of the technologies we embraced. Misinformation, widely disseminated propaganda, and distrust in what constitutes "truth" — this is the legacy of these information systems and the current landscape in which we teach information literacy. While it is unclear if instructional interventions alone are enough to counter this problem, it is still crucial that librarians receive the training to show up and develop the meaningful and effective teaching practices that expose these systems to our students.

But instead of getting in front of this knowledge gap, graduate programs have consistently lagged behind. iSchools that minimize or deprioritize the instructional curriculum do not allow their students to explore innovative teaching methods, resulting in myths like learning styles still finding their way into the classroom.

Instructional librarians who want to engage more deeply with the Framework, design with flexible rather than prescriptive models, or explore critical pedagogies beyond the foundational behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist approaches have been left to their own devices. These concepts deserve equal weight in the graduate curriculum alongside such standards as information organization and collection development.

Burdening early career librarians with the responsibility of filling in gaps on their own the minute they graduate results in the type of burnout and imposter syndrome anxieties noted throughout the literature.

It doesn't have to be this way. Librarians don't have to enter the classroom for the first time without the training to teach. iSchools can bolster instructional offerings, provide teaching experience, and establish supportive structures so that academic librarians can think beyond rote bibliographic instruction and address more pressing information literacy competencies.

The good news is we don't have to burn everything to the ground and start over. There are iSchools thinking creatively about how best to equip future librarians for what lies ahead. Drawing on existing programs for inspiration, and moving forward with these four recommendations, is one way to balance the grad school value equation in favor of the MLIS.

First, iSchools should look to the certificates like the one offered by the University of Arizona, which expanded course offerings that could either be used as an instruction track within the master's degree or a stand-alone certificate for master's or bachelor-level professionals looking to develop their teaching identity. Pedagogical content knowledge, instructional design principles, and culturally responsive classrooms are topics explored within the certificate that are typically ignored when instruction is relegated to a single course.

By growing the curriculum to 12 units, this iSchool invested in faculty and resources that support teaching librarians, a priority that benefits all enrolled students, not just those specifically on the instruction path. To improve instructional offerings, all accredited

programs don't have to create exact replicas of Arizona, but it demonstrates an innovative approach that augments iSchool electives and gets closer to addressing the training gap.

Second, opportunities for experiential learning need to be increased, so students gain experience in front of a classroom. For many early-career librarians, teaching assistant positions are not an option as they are in other graduate programs, so the limited instructional course offerings available to them frequently use classroom presentations or discussion-led activities rather than actual practice teaching.

Students need to have the experience of standing in front of learners who are not other students in their program and teaching them something. This doesn't have to take the form of field experiences or internships, which can frequently be disconnected from purposeful work or place undue burdens on students. Instead, classes can coordinate these authentic teaching experiences as part of the coursework at the same time they're discussing learning theory and design models. This will help situate teaching within an appropriate context while a supportive instructor facilitates individual and group reflection.

Instruction courses have grown more creative, finding live audiences for students to teach to as part of the course activities. Partnerships with the university library have been particularly fruitful, with iSchool students co-teaching undergraduates in subject liaison teams at San José State University, with a mentor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, as part of a workshop series at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, or even independently as part of a scaffolded, multi-semester fellowship at the University of Maryland.

iSchools should use this as a jumping off point to build additional inventive, yet logical, partnerships with schools, public libraries, nonprofit organizations, and institution education departments to create these authentic instructional opportunities. And, just as iSchools have been able to offer field options for distance students, these partnerships can be developed in students' local communities to make these valuable experiences accessible.

Third, iSchools must mandate academic advising. Higher education is a bureaucracy and navigating the hidden curriculum can prove frustrating for all and insurmountable for some online, nontraditional, and first-generation students. Graduate programs do not make this process any easier.

While all iSchools offer advising services, most are elective, requiring students to reach out or respond to advisor messages. One internal review at Drexel's iSchool, prompted by a 25% attrition rate from the master's program, found that only 15.8% of students met with their advisor.

iSchools have core curricula, but most program hours are made up of electives and class selection is left to the students. Instructional options remain limited and yet there are still less visible opportunities that offer exposure to teaching practices. For example, many programs allow students to take classes from external departments that count toward the degree, so more frequent meetings with an advisor might steer students to education and instructional design courses outside the iSchool class schedule.

Advising is an understudied area in LIS programs, and most research showing benefits is focused on undergraduate education. But so many students enter their programs with no library experience and therefore have limited understanding about the career and library environment they hope to work in upon graduating. Speaking to an advisor at strategic points in the program could help students clarify their career goals, better grasp their future job responsibilities, and be directed toward the instructional course offerings that do exist they might have otherwise missed.

Of course, students who are comfortable navigating this system or seeking help will find their way, but are those the only students we want to be successful? Setting mandatory check-ins with advisors can ensure they're getting the peek behind the curtain they need to make sound decisions about their future.

And finally, as part of the expansion of instruction courses, iSchools should draw on and incorporate literature from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). SoTL reframes teaching and learning as research problems that should be engaged through study and investigation and, most importantly, shared widely beyond one's own field of expertise.

Like information literacy, SoTL is interdisciplinary. Unlike information literacy, SoTL speaks an interdisciplinary language that educators outside of library and information science can comprehend.

iSchool students exposed to SoTL prior to entering the profession can be better equipped for many responsibilities of their new career, not just teaching. By using the same instruction and pedagogy vocabulary used by disciplinary faculty, status hurdles are more easily cleared and worries about inequities in teaching experiences can be addressed, leaving room for librarians to engage and collaborate meaningfully with faculty as colleagues.

Librarians can't teach information literacy by themselves. The profound epistemic breach facing students cannot be repaired in a one-shot session. Deeper instructional knowledge will be helpful in reaching students where they are, but it is simply one prong of what should be a multi-pronged campaign in which disciplinary faculty are our partners.

The inclusion of SoTL in graduate preparation will give librarians some of the tools they need to reach both students and faculty, conducting research that may resonate more directly with non-library colleagues and demonstrating how to integrate information literacy into their classrooms and their disciplines. Developing a more collaborative relationship with faculty could open the doors to new partnerships and opportunities that upend the traditional instructional structures the field has relied on.

There are examples to draw on; these changes can be made. But doing so will require iSchools to demonstrate they value instruction by investing in it.

Librarians are having a moment in the spotlight in the Misinformation Age, and they should trade on this attention by advocating for the changes needed to train the next generation of instructional librarians. Otherwise, we're left with a degree that doesn't keep up with the changing demands of students, the career they're preparing for, or the world in which people find and use information — and where's the value in that?

Read the author's reflections on what inspired this essay.

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